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LIVING DINOSAURS IN AFRICA? Seeking the true identity of mokélé-mbèmbé

In last month's issue, Dr Karl Shuker described the background to stories of the mokélé-mbèmbé, a very large and primarily aquatic mystery beast that is said to live in the Congolese region of West Africa.

Some cryptozoologists (those who study the evidence for species currently unrecognised by science) believe that the mokélé-mbèmbé could turn out to be a living long-necked (sauropod) dinosaur. How realistic is this possibility though?

In fact, as Karl explains in this article, there are actually other options to explain the identity of this mystery creature. Furthermore, reports of unidentified animals of this particular form and size are not confined exclusively to the Congo.

When it comes to trying to establish a possible identity for the mokélé-mbèmbé, always assuming that it is real and not just a fictitious monster of traditional native folklore, what might it be? The most conservative explanation is that it is merely a misidentified known species, but none of the major candidates – elephant, hippopotamus, manatee, crocodile or python – offer even the most superficial degree of resemblance to descriptions of the mokélé-mbèmbé.

▼ A distinguishing feature of the mokélé-mbèmbé is its three-toed appearance, whereas crocodiles for example have five toes, which is a very obvious point of difference.



Moreover, the local people who know the mokélé-mbèmbé are very adept at accurately identifying these other animals, which are all very familiar to them. It is therefore really not feasible that they could somehow invent a totally new creature through repeated misidentification of any of these animals? For the same reason, the notion that they would not realise that the mokélé-mbèmbé is nothing more than a submerged elephant with only its trunk protruding through the water surface, (as proposed by one Western scientist), does not seem credible either.

A plausible reptilian identity?

Rather more likely, perhaps, is that at least some sightings may have been of extra-large specimens of the Likouala's long-necked, soft-shelled freshwater turtle (*Trionyx triunguis*). If seen with only the upper surface of its shell and its vertical neck above the water surface of



▲ The location of the Republic of the Congo, and the location of Lake Télé, an area where the mokélé-mbèmbé is said to be present (arrow).

a lake, this species may well look like reported eyewitness descriptions of the mokélé-mbèmbé. However, it rarely exceeds 1m (3ft) long, and even allowing for Congolese claims that *Trionyx* specimens twice that size have been reported, this is still much smaller than the sizes that have been claimed for the mokélé-mbèmbé.

Another identity that has been suggested for the mokélé-mbèmbé is that this neodinosaur (meaning 'new dinosaur', reflecting its continued survival) may actually be a specialised



▲ Could giant soft-shelled turtles have given rise to belief in the mokélé-mbembé?

giant monitor lizard with an extraordinarily long neck. However, no such species is known either from modern times or from the fossil record, and monitors have feet with five toes. Consequently, they would not create the famous three-toed prints attributed to the mokélé-mbembé and which also, interestingly, characterised the sauropod dinosaurs as a group.

Also, virtually all monitors are carnivorous, whereas the mokélé-mbembé is reportedly exclusively herbivorous. Moreover, monitors are common in the Congo and therefore

very familiar creatures to the people in that region. It therefore seems strange that if the mokélé-mbembé was simply an extra-large version – something on the lines of the Komodo dragon (*Varanus komodoensis*) – why have the Congolese natives never described it as such?

The dinosaur option

Consequently, dramatic though it may seem, a living sauropod dinosaur remains the best morphological match for the Congo's elusive water dragon – and perhaps for good reason. One of the major riddles concerning the great dinosaur extinction at the end of the Cretaceous Period some 64 million years ago is what could have caused the death of every single species of dinosaur alive at that time?

There was a tremendous diversity of ecological, physiological, and morphological types, bearing in mind that the group represented

Did you know?

While it may seem unlikely that a dinosaur could have survived undetected for over 64 million years, it is worth considering the case of the coelacanth. Known only from the fossil record, this ancient fish was believed to have gone extinct in the late Cretaceous Period too, just like the dinosaurs.

In 1938, however, a living population of coelacanths was found off the coast of east Africa, close to the Comoros Islands near Madagascar. A second, separate Indonesian species of coelacanth has since been discovered as well, being described in 1999.



▲ A coelacanth. These are large fish, and can weigh 60kg (132lb) or more. Photo courtesy Citron / CC-BY-SA-3.0

▼ The largest known species of monitor is the Komodo dragon, found on the Indonesian island of this name, and yet again, like others of its kind, it has five, not three toes.

the dominant vertebrate life form on the planet at that stage. Equally puzzling is the fact that this mass extinction spared several other reptilian groups that were certainly no more varied than (if, indeed, they were even as diverse as) the dinosaurs.

A legacy from that era

Their modern representatives are familiar to us today, such as crocodilians, snakes, lizards, tortoises and turtles, and even a single lineage of sphenodontids, as represented by New Zealand's modern-day tuatara (*Sphenodon punctatus*). What possible agent of destruction could have been so specific and

Missed out?

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Monitor lizards often venture into water, but no species is known to have a neck as long as that described for the mokélé-mbembé.

exclusive as to annihilate the dinosaurs entirely, while permitting these other reptilian groups, including the dinosaurs' close relatives, in the guise of the crocodilians, and also (as many scientists believe) their direct descendants – birds – not only to persist, but also to have diversified since then?

It is this anomaly that has persuaded some cryptozoologists to consider the possibility that a few dinosaur lineages did manage to survive after all, staying relatively unchanged in form through the following 64 million years and lingering in untroubled seclusion within certain remote, inaccessible regions of the globe where they have faced little competition from any ecologically-equivalent mammals of large size.

Happily, with recent advances in DNA analysis, any physical remains obtained from a mokèlé-mbèmbé should swiftly assist in determining its true zoological identity. Obtaining those all-important remains, however, is another matter entirely!

Nothing of the mokèlé-mbèmbé killed in 1959 by pygmy tribesmen at Lake Télé in the Republic of the Congo still exists. Its body was discarded after people died, having eaten its flesh. There could, however, possibly be unrecognised skeletal remains being kept in a village in the area where it reputedly occurs.

Ranging further afield

Reports of mokèlé-mbèmbé-like beasts are not wholly confined to the Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon by any means. Similar creatures have also been reported from a number of other tropical African countries, and, highly



▲ The tuatara is a survivor from before the age of the dinosaurs. This family of reptiles used to have a much wider distribution.

▼ Reports of similar creatures extend down to Zambia.

significantly, their morphological descriptions remain remarkably consistent throughout.

Two notable localities are Zambia, in particular in the area of Lake Bangweulu, where the creature is dubbed the *mbilintu*, as well as the area formerly called Barotseland (now a northwestern district of

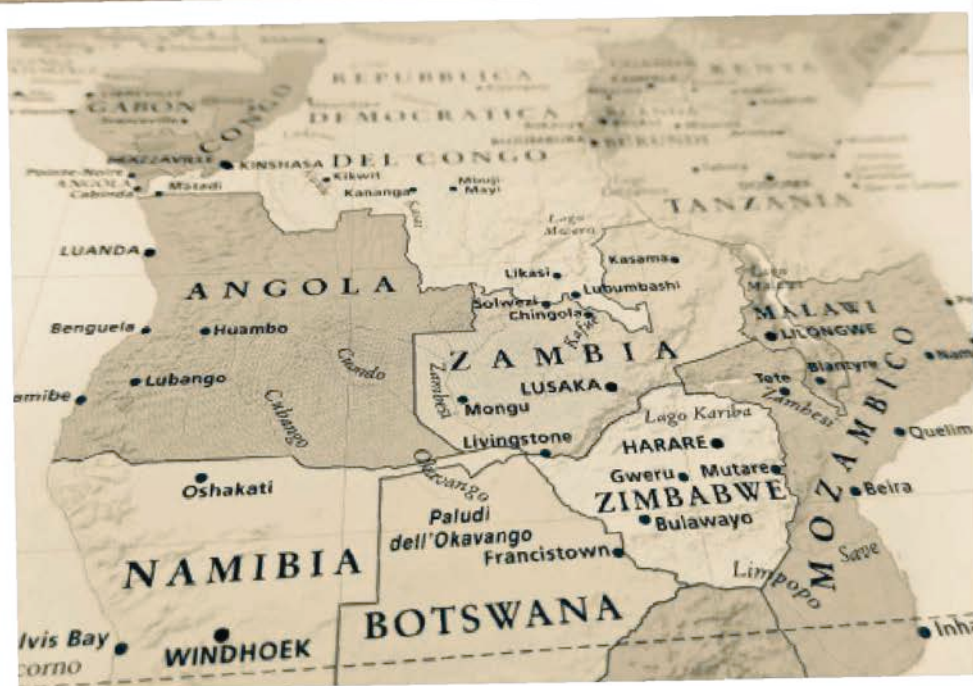


▲ Lake Bangweulu, shown here in red, is connected into the Congo River system, so it is perhaps not surprising that similar reports of mokèlé-mbèmbé-type creatures have originated from here. Map courtesy Kwamikagami.

Zambia) where it is termed the *isiquumadevu*. Further north, in the immense swamplands of the Democratic Congo (formerly Zaire and, before that, the Belgian Congo), local people refer to this creature as the *irizima*. Reports have also been filed from the Central African Republic, and it is known variously there as the *badigui*, *diba*, *guaneru*, *ngakula-ngu*, and *songo*.

Historical evidence

There are even some old but remarkably sauropod-reminiscent gold weights in existence, produced by Ashanti gold dealers in Ghana. Nor should we forget the series of ancient bushman paintings discovered in Zimbabwe's Goromonzi





He is the chief of the ways of God; he that made him can make his sword to approach unto him.

Surely the mountains bring him forth food, where all the beasts of the field play.

He lieth under the shady trees, in the covert of the reed, and fens.

The shady trees cover him with their shadow; the willows of the brook compass him about.

Behold, he drinketh up a river, and hasteth not: he trusteth that he can draw up Jordan into his mouth.

He taketh it with his eyes: his nose pierceth through snares."

▲ A behemoth (top) with a leviathan (bottom), as portrayed by William Blake. Source PD.

▼ Nile crocodiles – like other crocodilians – are carnivores, eating no plant matter. They can leap from the water, as seen here, to catch water birds, extending their neck as they do so. But the mokélé-mbèmbé is strictly herbivorous, based on native accounts.

Hills.

These artworks include a depiction of a mysterious beast astonishingly similar in form to a sauropod with its long neck emerging from a swamp. This is surrounded by other depictions that are readily recognisable as well-known creatures, such as hippos, elephants, giraffes and the like.

Their close proximity to the mystery beast and accurate portrayal in the paintings indicate that the sauropod-lookalike was just as real to the bushmen as the other, familiar animals, and presumably just as accurately drawn by them as well.

A Biblical reference?

Perhaps the most unexpected location for a possible mokélé-mbèmbé, however, is within the *Holy Bible* – yet such a prospect cannot be wholly discounted. A biblical monster that has never been satisfactorily identified with any known animal alive today is the behemoth, which is described in the book of Job (40:15–24) as follows:

"Behold now Behemoth, which I made with thee; he eateth grass as an ox.

Lo, now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly.

He moveth his tail like a cedar: the sinews of his stones are wrapped together.

His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron.

Over the centuries, four main suggestions to explain the likely identity of this mysterious beast have been put forward by theological and zoological scholars. These are an ox, a Nile crocodile, an elephant or a hippopotamus. The least popular proposal is the ox, because apart from its herbivorous nature, it has no similarity to the behemoth.

Similarly, only the *New English Bible* supports the crocodile's candidature – certainly, the concept of a vegetarian crocodile is an implausible one, to say the least. The elephant's supporters are also few – only Prof. George Caspard Kirschmayer in *Un-Natural History of Myths of Ancient Science* (1691) and Dr Sylvia Sikes in *The Natural History of the African Elephant* (1953) have seriously attempted to link these two great beasts with one another.

A new identity proposed for the behemoth

The most popular and (until recently) most favourable pairing of the behemoth has been with the hippopotamus – whose cavernous mouth, prodigious drinking capacity, mighty build, sturdy skeleton, swamp-dwelling lifestyle, herbivorous diet, and status as the largest animal native to the Bible lands compare satisfactorily with the behemoth – but not conclusively.

How, for example, can the hippopotamus "moveth his tail like a cedar"? This description implies a very long, powerful tail – not the puny, relatively inconspicuous appendage sported by the hippo.

But then came a late entry in the behemoth identity stakes – a living sauropod. As veteran cryptozoologist Professor Roy P. Mackal, seeker of the mokélé-mbèmbé during the 1980s, persuasively pointed out in his book





entitled *A Living Dinosaur?* (1987), not only the description of the behemoth's tail but also all of the features hitherto likened to the hippopotamus are equally applicable to one of these giant vegetarian dinosaurs.

Moreover, the great size attributed to the behemoth, far exceeding that of the hippo, would be much more compatible to a sauropod of the mokélé-mbembé's proportions. Compare the Bible's description of the behemoth (given above) with Mackal's argument to support his sauropod identity for it (given below), and judge for yourself:

"The behemoth's tail is compared to a cedar, which suggests a sauropod. This identification is reinforced by other factors. Not only the behemoth's physical nature, but also its habits and food preferences are compatible with the sauropod's. Both live in swampy areas with trees, reeds and fens (a jungle swamp). Indeed, the identification of the biblical behemoth as a sauropod dinosaur provides excellent correspondence between the descriptive features in the biblical text and the characteristics of these dinosaurs as inferred from the fossil record."

Support elsewhere?

So far in this article, our investigation of possible living dinosaurs inhabiting the vast, scarcely explored swamplands of the People's Republic of the Congo has concentrated upon the mokélé-mbembé, plus its possible kin in neighbouring lands. However, some other, very different mystery beasts that compare surprisingly well with certain other iconic dinosaurs from prehistoric times have also been reported from this same region of Africa.

▲ Could there be an unrecognised elephant killer in Africa's swamps?

These reports include a terrifying creature dubbed by the native people there as the *emela-ntouka* or 'killer of elephants'. The possible presence of other, perhaps unrecognised survivors from the age of the dinosaurs in turn actually gives greater credence to the

identity of the mokélé-mbembé itself as a sauropod.

** Dr Karl Shuker BSc PhD FRES FZS is a zoologist, author and broadcaster who is pre-eminent in the field of cryptozoology – the study of animals whose existence is not proven.*

Next month



In the concluding part of this series, Karl delves further into the realm of dinosaur-like creatures that might survive in this largely uncharted and little studied area of Africa. Aside from the possible sauropod dinosaur in the guise of the mokélé-mbembé, and the *emela-ntouka* as well, could there also be a living descendant of stegosaur lineage still flourishing in this region?

Discover more about such mysteries

Karl's recent book entitled *Dragons in Zoology, Cryptozoology, and Culture* (Coachwhip Publishing, 2012, ISBN 978-1616462154), which extends to 220 pages can be purchased from bookshops or online, and is priced at approximately £20.

